
HOW EXCELLENT A SHOWMAN:
JOSEPH EASTMAN SHEEHAN,
1885-1951

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FLAMBOYANT, charismatic, and always controversial, Joseph Eastman Sheehan, M.D., had a flair for the spectacular in an era when society's trauma from war and economic chaos set the perfect backdrop for his commanding performance. Internationally renowned for his cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, Sheehan had a predilection for operating on European nobility. A resourceful and practiced showman, he entertained his audience with colorful and cynical wit.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, April 1885, Sheehan emigrated at a young age to Wallingford, Connecticut, where his father worked as a laborer in a local silverplating plant. His father's early death left to young Joseph the responsibility of caring for his mother and four sisters. Such deterrents did not stop Sheehan. Determined to succeed, he became the classic Horatio Alger character.

Graduating from Yale Medical School in 1908, Sheehan financed his education by waiting on tables in the Yale cafeteria. His laboratory notebooks contained beautiful and skillfully drawn dissections. Interested in surgery, he pursued his training in Europe as was the custom at that time. First he worked with Kocher in Bern and then travelled to Vienna, Berlin, Heidelberg, Budapest, Paris, London, and Oxford. He returned to New York City in 1912 and married Anastasia Dwyer in 1914. They had a daughter, Marguerite Virginia.

During World War I Sheehan worked with Sir Harold Delf Gillies at Sidcup, England, where he developed his prize repair of unilateral facial paralysis by use of a muscle-nerve graft. This operation involved taking strips of temporalis muscle to restore action to areas innervated by the seventh cranial nerve.

Sheehan was a prolific writer, and pursued topics as diverse as eugenics, color photography, and the proper color for operating rooms to relieve

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eye strain. He wrote five major texts in plastic and reconstructive surgery. His academic positions included professor of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the New York Polyclinic Medical School, clinical professor of surgery at Columbia University and consultant to several American and European Hospitals.

Early in his career, J. Eastman Sheehan realized the importance of public relations for developing a personal and professional mystique. In 1926 Sheehan was sued for \$100,000 by Rhea Huston Stevens, former wife of actor Walter Huston. She claimed, "her face was permanently scarred and her health injured by the "face lifting" operation performed by Dr. Sheehan."¹ In response to her charges, "Dr. Sheehan, his prematurely gray hair and waxed mustache giving him an air of distinction, preferred to say nothing for publication, but pointed to his busy waiting room, filled with men and women, the latter in their late thirties and early forties, as if in answer to the charge that he is 'unskillful' in beautifying the face by surgery."¹ This suit was then the largest brought against a doctor and drew the attention of the general public as it allowed a glimpse into the world of the rich and famous. The case was settled out of court and Sheehan gained much notoriety.

In 1935 Sheehan was elected president of the American Association of Plastic Surgeons. At this time John Dillinger was apprehended and the plastic surgeon who attempted to alter Dillinger's fingertips and features was arrested. Director John Edgar Hoover of the Federal Bureau of Investigation threatened to jail surgeons who aided criminals with plastic surgery. *Time Magazine* interviewed Sheehan to discuss the ability of plastic surgeons to alter distinguishable features of criminals. Dr. Sheehan asserted, "A competent plastic surgeon, if given time, can alter every mark by which human beings are ordinarily identified. The advantage which the police still have in dealing with criminals is that the criminal is always in a hurry. And this work, to be well done, takes time."²

After the interview, Sheehan invited the journalist to his office, which was considered "the world's most gorgeous consultation establishment. There are two butlers, a general manager (Henry Osman), a secretary and blonde Hilda Krupp, the housekeeper who stands by all day so that at any moment the Doctor may have his whittled asparagus, hamburgers or sausages, toast, strawberry jam and tea. Hilda also presses his suits (25 at a time), rolls bandages, keeps everybody cheerful, including Henry who has most to do with the patients' bills (up to \$10,000 for an operation, \$75 for a housecall)."²

This magazine article caused much controversy with the members of the association. They felt that Sheehan had acted improperly and presented a poor image of plastic surgery to the public. Therefore all but ten members resigned in protest. Before the members would rejoin the association, Sheehan was forced to resign as trustee, but was allowed to remain president for his term so long as he did not grant any more interviews with the press.

One of Sheehan's major contributions to plastic and reconstructive surgery was his role in developing formal training programs in plastic surgery and hospitals in Spain. Maintaining a summer practice in London, Sheehan befriended many members of the European nobility. The Duke of Alba, on behalf of Alphonso XIII, king of Spain, invited J. Eastman Sheehan to tour Spain in 1928 and to offer suggestions for treating the wounded soldiers of the Riff Campaign during the Moroccan uprising. Spending several weeks in Spain operating on wounded troops and teaching young surgeons reconstructive techniques, Sheehan was awarded the Order of Alphonso XIII. During the Spanish Civil War Generalissimo Franco invited Sheehan to organize reconstructive hospitals and formally to train plastic and reconstructive surgeons. This time Sheehan was made an honorary colonel in Franco's army.

The story now takes on new dimensions. Lord and Lady Nuffield, the originators of the *MG* automobile, were close friends of Sheehan's. Through his encouragement and direction, they endowed the Nuffield Chair of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Oxford. Of course, J. Eastman Sheehan was to be selected as professor. However, because he worked for Generalissimo Franco and held rank in his army, Sheehan was labelled a Fascist and was not allowed to enter England. Lord Nuffield asked his friend Winston Churchill to argue Sheehan's case before Parliament and finally Sheehan was granted an entry visa. Unfortunately, the Board of Overseers at Oxford did not look favorably on his application and T. Pomfret Kilner was selected. This deeply hurt Sheehan because he felt that he had dedicated his entire life to the development of plastic surgery from its infancy to a well recognized and respected specialty.

Returning to New York City, Sheehan continued an active private practice. In 1951 he suffered a stroke and died. In his obituary it was written, "He had a flair for showmanship and the spectacular which was frequently misunderstood by his associates."

"He was a man of many facets. An ardent, persistent student, whether the subject had a professional, artistic, literary, historical international

political or linguistic objective, who pursued his purpose to the limit of his ability.'³ Indeed, J. Eastman Sheehan may best be described as the consummate renaissance man.

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